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ABSTRACT

## Photography: Intimating Mortality A Heideggerian Account of Photographic Authenticity

“To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. ... All photographs testify to time's relentless melt.”<sup>1</sup>

Susan Sontag

“Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein”<sup>1</sup>

Martin Heidegger



(Fig.1) Elsa and Lotti, 1938



(Fig.2) Elsa and Lotti, 1992<sup>1</sup>

We all know that we will die one day.

This is a fundamental aspect of our lives. Not only is death inescapable but the finitude of our lives structures what it means to be a human being, a person. We are born, we live, we die. The time of our lives, in all senses, makes us who we are. Yet, as much as this is clear it also constitutes a blind spot. It is one of the least understood aspect of human existence. We spend our lives living. This may seem an obvious statement, but it is impossible to comprehend and think our own death. And this impossibility seems to be essential to death.<sup>2</sup> In other words death is fundamentally inexperienceable and therefore unthinkable. We live and when we stop living, we are no more; there is no identity that remains. To be dead is not to be. To be is to live, to experience the world, continuously. How can we even begin to understand our death, which is outside of our lives, and so beyond ourselves?

I shall argue that photography as a specific form of visual expression not only represents the world, but shows what being in the world means. Photography intimates our experience of the world beyond the visible. Photography's power to refer directly to the particular leads to its ability to show the particular moment. Therefore, it can illustrate death. This means that photography not only can represent dead objects but also disrupts the temporal structure of perceptual experience and therefore brings into consciousness the finality of our being. This happens through the immediacy of seeing and not intellectual understanding. Our own death is disturbing and frightening, because it is essentially unimaginable, which renders an analysis of it as a phenomenon or event futile. Photography, though, is a medium, which can express the belonging of death to life and show that living being is, with Heidegger, “being towards death”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this chapter I refer to two photographs of my grandmother and her sister. I encourage the reader to look at these images and reflect on the experience of looking at photographs. I use personal pictures to emphasise the particularity of the scene presented. Also, I will refer to two pictures taken at different points of time of the same people to highlight the disruption of time photography engenders.

<sup>2</sup>There are many aspects, which make thinking about death difficult. We don't want to think about pain, grief, mourning and loss. These connotations are linked to the death of others. However, in this chapter I wish to focus on the idea of our own death.

<sup>3</sup>It is important to note that I am not arguing that photography is morbid, i.e. that with every photograph we look at we linger on our mortality. However, the contemplation of photography allows for an authentic way of being towards death. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 235 (Heidegger devotes several sections to the existential analysis of death, starting at p.235)